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DEPARTMENT FOR EAP/MLS, H, DRL, PRM/ANE; BANGKOK FOR USAID;  
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SUBJECT: REPRESENTATIVE MCCOLLUM MEETS VICE FOREIGN MINISTER

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Representative Betty McCollum of Minnesota, in her first visit to Laos, pressed Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath to accept more of a role for NGOs, to take advantage of international respect for the ICRC by allowing it to monitor the situation of the Hmong within Laos, to resolve the year-old issue of the 26 detained children, and to allow more religious diversity. Most interestingly, Phongsavath did not invoke the almost-automatic denial that the Lao Government had any information on the children in his response. End summary.

¶2. (C) The first official meeting of Representative Betty McCollum, s December 21-29 first visit to Laos was with long-time Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath Boupha on December 22. Deputy Prime Minister/Foreign Minister Thongloun Sisoulith was traveling abroad. Representative McCollum expressed appreciation for the assistance of the Government of Laos (GOL) with the search for remains of MIA from the Vietnam War period, emphasizing the importance to the families of being able to say a final goodbye. Phongsavath, in turn, thanked Representative McCollum for her assistance in the process of the USG granting normal trade relations (NTR) to Laos.

#### The McCollum Presentation

¶3. (C) Representative McCollum effectively pressed in a number of areas. She told the Vice Foreign Minister there is much opportunity for a partnership of the USG and GOL to deal with the unexploded ordnance (UXO) problem and emphasized the role of NGOs in the process. Citing news about Laos in U.S. newspapers which was not always positive, Representative McCollum told Phongsavath there needs to be a &third party8 which is well-respected internationally and which can verify those areas in which Laos is doing a good job (including dealing with resettled Hmong insurgents and their family members). She then told Phongsavath that the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is such a group, noting that the ICRC has even criticized the USG when it did not live up to the ideals the American people expect. She also cited as a &challenge8 the issue of the 26 detained children and said she understood that Laos and Thailand were working to resolve the issue; resolving this issue would make it easier to say to the Congress that Laos is &a good partner.8

¶4. (C) Representative McCollum praised GOL cooperation on Avian Influenza issues, saying that Laos could be a model for other countries. Later in the conversation, she returned to the importance of NGO assistance in supplementing

government-to-government programs and in providing individual Americans the opportunity to become involved in this process.

Representative McCollum noted that she is constantly being asked by other Members of Congress and constituents for proof that things in Laos are going well to point out that she and the Embassy both need to be able to show progress on the range of issues we are dealing with.

¶15. (C) Representative McCollum pointed out the advantages of people being able to speak several languages to press Phongsavath to respect minority languages ) although not disputing the teaching of the Lao language in schools as the national language. Finally Representative McCollum noted she was away from home during the Christmas holiday for the first time and pleased she would be able to attend church services in Vientiane to highlight her concern about the GOL,s respect for religious diversity and its need to find common ground with various religious groups. (Note: In subsequent meetings with other officials Representative McCollum was able to point out she had attended Christmas mass and met the Bishop to emphasize the importance to her of freedom of religion. End note.)

#### Phongsavath,s Views

¶16. (C) Phongsavath noted Representative McCollum would be going to Xiang Khouang Province to visit a school and hospital and pointed out the people of Xiang Khouang Province ) which has UXO throughout the province ) are even more affected than those in Savannakhet Province which was bombed more heavily but with UXO concentrated in its less-populated eastern areas. Phongsavath called for developing stronger trade relations with the United States now that NTR had been granted. He noted that Laos is one of the least developed countries in the world and expressed hope that NTR would help the GOL achieve its goal of significant economic progress by ¶2020. Although bilateral cooperation on counter-narcotics has been successful ) the GOL declared it had eliminated opium growing in 2005 ) Phongsavath expressed concern that former growers might return to their lucrative crop if substitution crops and support programs are not in place, a problem especially in the more remote rural areas.

¶17. (C) Phongsavath complained about criticism of GOL programs to move people from remote areas to lowland locations and concentrating them in groups. Critics claim this violates the human rights of those being moved, but Phongsavath stated their lives would be better in these better locations. Responding to Representative McCollum,s suggestion to allow the ICRC to monitor conditions including at villages with resettled people from remote areas as well as returned refugees (from Thailand), Phongsavath said it was a &good idea which could be considered. He also mentioned in general working with the Thai Government on issues with the Hmong. (Note: Interestingly, when Representative McCollum raised the 26 children who have now been detained by the GOL for more than one year, Phongsavath did not use the here-to-fore virtually automatic GOL statement denying having any information about the children.)

¶18. (C) Phongsavath was careful to say, when the conversation turned to religious freedom, that the Lao Constitution included the right to believe or not to believe. He also cited &misunderstandings& about reports of Christians being arrested in Laos, saying even Buddhists who broke the law were arrested. &If they did not commit wrongs, there would be no problems.8 Phongsavath noted the roles of the National Assembly as well as the mass organization Lao Front for National Construction in dealing with religious issues. Responding to the issue of respect for minority languages, Phongsavath pointed out some of Laos, many minority groups have only a few thousand members and complained that some stay in very remote areas and refuse to send their children to schools.

#### Comment

¶19. (C) The meeting with Vice Foreign Minister Phongsavath was

a cordial beginning for Representative McCollum,s first visit to Laos. We applaud Representative McCollum for emphasizing a range of key points where we would like to see progress from the GOL, including permission for increased ICRC activities here. On the ongoing saga of the 26 children, we saw Phongsavath,s non-denial as perhaps adding credence to rumors of progress toward resolution of this year-long case ) although responses by other officials in subsequent meetings were less encouraging (septels).

¶10. (U) Representative McCollum has cleared this cable.

HASLACH